

## Chapter 20

# New Age and Neopagan Magic

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The term “magic” in the context of New Age and Neopagan movements differs from magic as it was previously conceptualized in Western culture. Instead of implying surreptitious or irregular ways of controlling the natural world, it refers to a set of techniques for altering consciousness and bringing about personal transformation. Although the movements themselves also strive to transform the culture surrounding them in significant ways, such change is thought to begin at the individual level with personal enlightenment and self-realization. Magic thus becomes a technology for human growth and potential, for transforming human consciousness and creating a new perception of the world as sacred and enchanted.<sup>1</sup> What sets New Age and Neopagan magic apart from mysticism is the element of agency: adherents actively seek to alter their consciousness by following specific techniques. Enlightenment is thus the logical consequence of a volitional process, rather than the grace of God or the result of prayer or supplication.

Scholars have traditionally distinguished sharply between religion and magic. Magic has been categorized either as a primitive practice reflecting the erroneous conception that humans could control phenomena through ritual or as surreptitious ritual practices whose ends were individualistic rather than aimed at the well-being of the larger society. These distinctions have been critiqued by anthropologists, who have demonstrated that the dividing line between magic and religion is necessarily arbitrary, given that both practices involve maintaining relations with an invisible spirit world by means of ritual. In this chapter, I take an anthropological perspective on the question of the nature of religion and the relationship between religion and magic – a question I will explore more fully later in the chapter. I consider attempts to distinguish religion from magic to be grounded in a concept of religion as an analytic category that privileges Christian monotheism as the norm and views religions that deviate from it as deficient.<sup>2</sup> Magic is used as a foil against which to define legitimate religious practice, perpetuating a pattern going back to

classical times.<sup>3</sup> My definition of religion is based on that of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who views it as a cultural system that provides:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>4</sup>

This is important when dealing with Neopaganism and the New Age movement because both involve practices that may be categorized as magic either by the practitioners themselves (in the case of Neopagans) or by outside observers (in the case of the New Age movement) but that are essentially religious according to a Geertzian definition. Although they are part of a Western cultural and spiritual trajectory, these movements challenge established notions of magic and religion as separate, irreconcilable categories. They demonstrate how the application of anthropological analytical tools can be useful within a Western context, and they decenter prevailing notions that are based on Christianity as a normative religion.

Both “New Age” and “Neopagan” are umbrella terms for spiritual movements comprising a wide diversity of practices and beliefs. The two communities are contiguous and share certain common features – a worldview that privileges experience over belief, the location of spiritual authority within the self, and a focus on self-realization and human potential – inspired by the spiritual and esoteric movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and sustained by the countercultural stance of various social movements of the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> They generally reject the idea of a supernatural world separate from the natural one, and they perceive what mainstream religions might label as supernaturalism – for example, divination or communication with the dead – as part of the skills that humans are accorded within the natural world. Both lack a single authoritative sacred text or a recognized prophet and instead eclectically combine spiritual material from a variety of cultural and historical sources. New Agers and Neopagans are also non-exclusive: participation in these movements does not preclude belonging to other religious or spiritual communities or belonging to multiple denominations within the movements themselves. Given these commonalities, scholars have tended to group them together.<sup>6</sup> However, these groups’ self-perceptions are not congruent with scholarly classifications. Both New Agers and Neopagans are quite individualistic and resist being stereotyped or grouped into categories. Most modern Pagans object to being identified with the New Age movement, which

they perceive as shallow, simplistic, and commercialistic. Likewise, most New Agers reject being classified with Neopagans, whom they deride for their colorful ritual costumes or dark, Goth-inspired looks.<sup>7</sup> There may also be significant class differences between the two groups, with New Agers tending to have a higher level of income than Neopagans.<sup>8</sup> Wouter Hanegraaff sees modern Pagans as constituting a specific and separate subculture within the New Age movement.<sup>9</sup> Although this classification has its drawbacks, the two movements share enough of a common history and worldview that they can be treated together in terms of their conceptualization of magic.

One of the primary differences between Neopagans and New Agers is that the former actively embrace magic. They define it as a set of spiritual techniques to change consciousness at will, and they use it to re-enchant the universe, expand human potential, achieve self-realization and planetary healing, and ultimately bring humans into contact with the sacred. Neopagans locate spiritual authenticity in ancient, pre-Christian religions. They see Christianity and monotheistic religions more generally as the source of many contemporary problems, including the alienation of humans from the natural environment, the exploitation of natural resources and native peoples, and a moralism that stigmatizes and curtails natural expressions of sexuality. Modern Pagans seek to reclaim ancient religious traditions as a way of reconnecting with the sacred in the natural world and creating a greater sense of community among peoples and other living beings. They view the practice of ritual magic as central to this enterprise.

In contrast, New Age practitioners are less likely to embrace the concept of magic than Neopagans are, and they foreground instead the “science” of their worldview. Certain scientific theories, particularly those that seek to explain the universe through a single unitary model (e.g., Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* and Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*), are interpreted as legitimating a New Age spiritual worldview that seeks unity behind all phenomena and may be used to argue against the scientific establishment, which is perceived as alienating, reductionist, and responsible for many modern ills.<sup>10</sup> However, saying that magic has little significance for New Agers ignores both the religious dimensions of New Age science and important changes in the way that scholars understand magic.

Most scholars of the New Age movement acknowledge that although, unlike Neopaganism, it does not constitute a group of religions, it nevertheless has a strong spiritual dimension. New Agers seek a deep personal transformation at the spiritual or psychological level. This transformation frequently has a mystical component: the individual departs from an earlier stage of life

dominated by negative aspects (e.g., illness, purposelessness, hopelessness, rigidity, adherence to orthodox modes of thought, or participation in an exploitative relationship) as a result of a transformative experience that imparts enlightenment and endows life with meaning, hope, and purpose. A variety of technologies may be used to bring about this transformation; these are often described or understood in terms that use the language of science as a legitimizing discourse. Regardless of the technology employed, the nature of personal transformation and enlightenment is spiritual, and it often involves adopting an ongoing practice or set of rituals intended to uphold the results of the original transformation and create similar experiences in others. In this sense, the transformative experience and practices employed to maintain the experience of enlightenment it engendered can be seen as having something in common with magic.

To attempt to delineate the role of magic in the New Age movement and modern Paganism entails entering one of the central scholarly conversations in contemporary anthropology on the nature of magic and its relationship to two other important categories in anthropological thought: religion and science. The common Western concept of magic encompasses both a cosmology in which supernatural forces play a significant role and a set of technologies that are applied by the magician to attempt to control those forces and bend them to his or her will. Western attitudes toward magic have generally been negative, especially in the comparison of magic with religion and science. Juxtaposed against religion, magic has been portrayed as instrumental, mechanical, manipulative, anti-social, and coercive, aimed at achieving specific short-term goals for the individual. Religious ritual, by contrast, allegedly entreats supernatural powers for their general benevolence, and it is designed to unify society for the good of all.<sup>11</sup> Anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah, in his critique of the anthropological study of magic, argued that this dichotomy between magic and religion had its roots in the Protestant Reformation, which, in seeking a more direct relationship between the individual and God, denounced certain Catholic doctrines, such as transubstantiation and traditions associated with saints' feasts and seasonal liturgical rites, as vestiges of pagan magic.<sup>12</sup> This perspective continued to be reflected in the views of early anthropologists such as Edward B. Tylor and Sir James G. Frazer, for whom magic represented a primitive and ultimately false method for understanding how the world worked and attempting to control it. In their unilinear conception of cultural evolution, magic was destined to be replaced first by organized religion and eventually by modern science. When contrasted against science, magic again fared badly, coming off as irrational and based

on mistaken notions of how the world operates. Magical practitioners were assumed to lack rationality, either because they did not have the scientific knowledge necessary to understand how the world worked, as in the case of indigenous cultures, or because they were in a powerless position within a culture, as in the case of disadvantaged minorities living within a modernized Western state. For the latter, magic was understood as a compensatory mechanism that would eventually disappear as they became educated and fully integrated into the dominant culture. Some early studies of Neopaganism and New Age movements construed the construct of magic as a way of thinking that is opposed to rationality, although they struggled with the fact that adherents did not fit the expected categories of believers, in that they were typically middle class and belonged to the majority culture. The anthropologist T. M. Luhrmann's *Persuasions of the Witches' Craft* (1979), an ethnography of Neopagan witches and ritual magicians in London, questioned how educated, middle-class people could believe in and claim to practice magic. Luhrmann showed how modern magicians used metaphorical language and imaginative narrative to overcome their doubts, and she hypothesized that members came to interpret their experiences as magical through gradual exposure to other members' narratives, a process she called "interpretive drift."<sup>13</sup>

Another line of thinking in anthropology that began in the mid-twentieth century critiqued the separation of magic, religion, and science as inherently flawed because of the ethnocentric nature of early anthropological inquiry and the consequent imposition of Western categories and values on the cosmologies of non-Western peoples. The British sociocultural anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard first called attention to the dangers of superimposing Western terms such as "witchcraft" and "magic" onto non-Western systems, where native categories might not correspond closely to Western ones. He also demonstrated that indigenous people such as the Azande of western Sudan were perfectly capable of performing rational deductive thinking while simultaneously maintaining a firm belief in the power of witches and oracles.<sup>14</sup> A broader critique was presented by the American anthropologists Murray Wax and Rosalie Wax, who noted that the separation of magic from religion was a uniquely Western construct, one that the majority of indigenous religions did not share. They called for the abandonment of magic as an analytical category on the basis of its inadequacy and ethnocentrism.<sup>15</sup>

A second critique attacked the notion of magic as a pre-rational or irrational way of understanding the world. The French anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl hypothesized in his posthumously published notebooks that rational-logical and mystical, or "participatory," ways of thought coexisted in all

human societies. Although the latter could perhaps be more easily observed in premodern societies, he cautioned that it was present in every human mind and that without it “would perhaps disappear . . . poetry, art, metaphysics and scientific invention – almost everything, in short, that makes for the beauty and grandeur of human life.”<sup>16</sup> This view was taken up by the anthropologist Stanley J. Tambiah, who warned that “[a] narrow yardstick of ‘rationality’ misses the theatrical and illocutionary aspects of ritual performance.”<sup>17</sup> He characterized the participatory way of thought as involving all of the senses and emotions and as being expressed through art forms such as poetry, narrative, and ritual. British social anthropologist Susan Greenwood, an ethnographer of New Age and Neopagan movements, has further characterized participatory consciousness as creating emotional connections to the world, using holistic language, expressing itself through metaphor, seeing the world as “inspired” or animated by spiritual forces, and making use of alternative states of consciousness.<sup>18</sup>

In the twenty-first century, therefore, anthropologists are beginning to interpret magic as a form of participatory consciousness accessible to humans living in any form of society in all historical periods. In contrast with a logical-causal mode of thought, with which it always coexists, participatory consciousness sensorially involves the individual in an animated universe filled with spiritual forces and perceived as a unified, coherent, and meaningful whole. It finds expression through creative means, be they poetry, narrative, or ritual or other forms of art, and it communicates through metaphor. It connects individuals to the world around them through strong emotional bonds, emphasizing feeling over detachment. It often operates through alternate states of consciousness – states that differ from ordinary waking consciousness and that range from dreams and light trances, such as those brought on by listening to a story or becoming involved in a performance, to dramatic dissociative states in which the individual may feel disconnected from the self and fully merged with another being or consciousness. According to this understanding, “magic” may include techniques used to achieve a participatory state of consciousness, as well as the insights and personal transformations that are derived as a result of experiences of participatory consciousness. Given this revised definition, it will become clear that magic is central to both Neopagan and New Age practices and worldviews.

The American religious historian J. Gordon Melton, one of the first scholars to seriously study the New Age movement, sees the idea of transformation as the key to defining and understanding the movement.<sup>19</sup> Transformation, in



this context, refers both to a personal transformation of the individual and to the transformation of culture and humanity more broadly. Both New Agers and Neopagans share a yearning for a better future – one characterized by world peace, social justice, and ecological renewal. In both, global transformation generally begins at the individual level with a transformative spiritual experience – one that forces the individual into a more participatory mode of consciousness. The insights gleaned from this participatory consciousness are then used to transform material aspects of life – for example, the adoption of new dietary practices – that promise to eventually effect broader changes in culture.

In addition to the importance of experiences of participatory consciousness in New Age and Neopagan practice, both groups also cultivate relationships with a variety of spiritual beings, such as gods and goddesses, nature spirits, spirits of the dead, angels, and aliens. Both reject mainstream monotheism, although some may perceive the existence of a single divine principle in the universe, of which spirits are aspects or “emanations.”<sup>20</sup> Spirits may be perceived either as existing in their own right or as “archetypes” representing those parts of the human experience whose existence has a sociocultural reality. Communication with spirits can take place through meditation, “channeling,” and exchange with spirit guides during ritual or trance. Spirit beings become an intimate part of practitioners’ lives: they help with material goals, such as getting jobs or finding apartments, as well as spiritual growth and planetary healing. Spirits may enter into the lives of New Agers and Neopagans unbidden: the New Age author J. Z. Knight first perceived Ramtha, her spirit guide, at her bedside; Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy MacLean, the founders of Findhorn, a New Age farming community in Scotland, were contacted by plant devas who instructed them in gardening techniques; and Laurel Olson Mendes, a Neopagan priestess and seið practitioner,<sup>21</sup> first experienced communication from a goddess while singing the soprano recitatives from Handel’s “Messiah” in her church choir (see Figure 20.1). New Age and Neopagan belief systems and practices normalize such encounters, creating contexts in which practitioners learn to control and understand them. It could be argued that given the stigmatization of spiritual encounters in Western secular culture and mainstream religions, Neopagan and New Age subcultures create spaces where those who have undergone them can find acceptance and understanding and also learn techniques to harness their experiences for personal development and self-actualization.



FIGURE 20.1. Community Center at Findhorn, an intentional New Age community in Scotland. Image under Creative Commons License.

### Magical Roots

Although both the New Age movement and Neopaganism emerged during the twentieth century, they share historical roots in Western esotericism going back to classical times. Esotericism includes a number of interrelated philosophies and religious traditions dating to antiquity, including Neo-Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, and Christianity. The French scholar Antoine Faivre identifies six characteristics common to esoteric philosophies. These include: the idea of correspondences between all parts of the visible and invisible worlds, such that the macrocosm is reflected in and can be understood by studying the microcosm, and vice versa; the view of nature as inspirited by a divine force; the possibility of mediating between worlds through rituals that manipulate the correspondences between them, as well as seeing the imagination as an instrument for self-knowledge and gnosis; the belief that transformation is possible through an inner process or mystical path that reveals the mysteries of the cosmos and brings the initiate closer to God; the tendency to seek commonalities between and among traditions in order to gain further illumination; and the transmission of knowledge from master to disciple as part of an initiatory path, with the notion of a historical genealogy of knowledge transmission as an



authenticating discourse.<sup>22</sup> These elements can be found in the philosophies of Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism; the premodern sciences of astrology, alchemy, and *mageia* (high magic or theurgy); and the theosophical current of from the Kabbalah, a set of Jewish mystical texts, all of which contributed to the development of magic in New Age and Neopagan thought.<sup>23</sup>

These disparate sources were brought together for the first time in Renaissance Florence through the work of Marsilio Ficino (1433–1499) and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). Under the patronage of Cosimo de' Medici, Ficino was responsible for compiling and translating into Latin various Greek manuscripts known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, or *Hermetica*, which consisted of mystical and philosophical writings drawing from Platonism, Stoicism, Neo-Platonism, and Egyptian Gnosticism dating from the second half of the second century CE to the end of the third century CE. The central figure in these texts was Hermes Trismegistus, a syncretic fusion of the Greek god Hermes with the Egyptian god Thoth. According to the Hermetic material, the central principle in the universe was that of sacred unity: everything in the universe derived ultimately from a single divine source. The universe consisted of multiple spheres, or “emanations”: nature, stars, spirits and “guardians,” and *nous*, or angelic spirits closest to the source of creation. The goal of Hermetic magic was to achieve oneness with the Godhead by entering into the realms of divine thought. Pico della Mirandola further developed Ficino's work by combining it with his knowledge of the Kabbalah, astrology, Christian mysticism, and theurgy, or *mageia*. Pico believed that humans could raise themselves to the level of gods through the practice of *mageia*: magic was a route to enlightenment and understanding, because it could raise earthly matter to the level of the Godhead.

The theme of spiritual transformation was also important to early modern alchemists, the successors of the Renaissance magi. Alchemists' work was based on the Hermetic concepts of the fundamental unity of the universe and the correspondences between the physical and spiritual realms, or “microcosm and macrocosm.” Thus, chemical alchemy was concerned with the process of transmuting base metals into gold, but this process also had a metaphorical dimension: it represented the transmutation of the human soul from its base nature to its highest possible state: a union with God. These concepts in turn were influential to the development of the symbolic elements of Freemasonry in the seventeenth century and to the emergence of the Society of the Rose Cross, or Rosicrucian Fraternity, in the eighteenth; through them, a set of magical symbols and concepts entered Western esoteric culture that continue to be used today in Neopaganism and some branches of New Age practice.

The first part of the nineteenth century saw a revival of interest in magical practice as a method of spiritual transformation in France, where the occultist Eliphas Levi rediscovered and reinterpreted the Kabbalah, linking it with ancient Egyptian religion and with the Tarot. By the final decades of the century, Levi's works had inspired the members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Practicing in England in the final decade of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, the founders of this organization "gather[ed] together the threads of the Western esoteric tradition and initiat[ed] a transformative process that continued into the twenty-first century."<sup>25</sup> The Order of the Golden Dawn was one of the most influential esoteric organizations in modern history; all modern magical systems derive from it to some degree.<sup>26</sup> The goal of Golden Dawn initiates was to ascend the Kabbalistic Tree of Life in order to emerge ritually into the Light, a term that was synonymous with union with the divine. This was accomplished through a ritual process in which the initiate identified with a sphere of consciousness symbolized by each of the nine stations on the Tree of Life. The Order of the Golden Dawn was among the first modern magical organizations to use and document alternate states of consciousness – including trance, out of body, and mystical experiences – for the purpose of personal spiritual transformation.<sup>27</sup> It also developed a precise technology using visualization and "willed imagination" to allow adepts to achieve an altered state. Symbols and correspondences were of central importance to the Golden Dawn magicians, who believed that stimulation of all five senses was necessary in order for the adept to communicate successfully with the unconscious mind and with the deities. Associations with particular deities and qualities were based on a system of magical correspondences derived from Renaissance and classical magic, whereby each god or goddess was linked with specific colors, plants, minerals, precious stones, and perfumes. Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Wynn Westcott, two founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, compiled a table of these associations entitled *The Book of Correspondences* in the 1890s (see Figure 20.2); the list was later published by the ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley under his own name.<sup>28</sup> These same associations continue to be used in Neopagan magic today.

Renaissance Hermeticism and its successors can be interpreted as syncretizing the emerging discovery of nature as a documentable entity with a desire to maintain the sacred dimension of the cosmos.<sup>29</sup> In the period between the Renaissance and the nineteenth-century magical revival, Western magic underwent an increasing process of secularization on account of the development of science, the Enlightenment, and the disenchantment of the world.



FIGURE 20.2. Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, one of the founders of the Golden Dawn, a precursor to both New Age and Neopagan magic, in pseudo-Egyptian costume. Image in public domain.

The result was not an esotericism opposed to the Enlightenment or scientific thought but one that sought to come to terms with them.<sup>30</sup> The doctrines of Swedenborgianism and Spiritualism incorporated a Darwinian evolutionary framework into a discourse of the transmutation of the soul, whereas Mesmerism, a movement established by the seventeenth-century German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1735–1815), sought to integrate emerging scientific knowledge about magnetism and electricity into a spiritual framework that promised personal healing. The development of chiropractic and naturopathic medicine in the nineteenth century also synthesized science with spirituality and contributed to the formation of New Age concepts of alternative healing. As will be delineated in the next section, a concern with synthesizing spirituality and science continues to be a key interest of the New Age movement today. Ironically, Hanegraaff argues, these philosophies and practices were based on an acceptance of the disenchanted world; they represented “an attempt to adapt esotericism to a disenchanted world: a world which no longer harbors a dimension of irreducible mystery . . . based upon an experience of the sacred

as present in the daily world.”<sup>31</sup> In contrast, the emergence of Romanticism at the end of the eighteenth century represented a rejection of this compromise and a genuine attempt to re-enchant the world by reintroducing the element of mystery. The nineteenth-century rediscovery of magic was part of this drive toward re-enchantment: it was an attempt to re-create a participatory world-view.<sup>32</sup> Neopaganism embodies this impulse to a much greater degree than the New Age movement does. Thus, although the New Age movement and Neopaganism share roots in Western esotericism, the former is heir to philosophies and practices whose goal was to reconcile the scientific with the mystical, whereas the latter is the successor to Romantic movements whose goal was the re-enchantment and re-sacralization of the world.

Two additional cultural strains contributed to the development of Neopagan and New Age magic. The first was the psychologization of spirituality. Sigmund Freud’s (1856–1939) concepts of the unconscious and the link between the unconscious, dreams, and myth had a revolutionary impact on early twentieth-century thought. Individual consciousness was now understood as riddled with motivations, impulses, and anxieties that were not apprehensible to rational thought, because they were lodged deep in the unconscious. They emerged only through dreams, poetry, and mythology, making both the individual and culture more complex and multivalent than previous understandings had allowed. The work of the soul became not the attainment of salvation in the next life but the achievement of harmony and mental health in the present life through the healing of traumas and neuroses whose roots were buried in early experience, perhaps not even accessible to memory. The American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and the psychologist William James (1842–1910) each reflected these ideas in their works, albeit in different ways.<sup>33</sup> As a result, popular understandings of the cosmos, the universe, and the infinite acquired a psychological flavor: these notions, which were previously linked to religion, became understandable as psychological constructs, as aspects of the individual psyche. “Spiritual” and “psychological” became increasingly interchangeable terms. At the same time, new technologies – such as hypnosis, psychoanalysis, and dream analysis – emerged to integrate the hidden aspects of the soul with the conscious, rational ones, thus achieving healing. The work of Freud’s disciple Carl Jung (1875–1961) was enormously influential, in that it aimed at harmonizing science and rationalism (Jung was a trained physician) with esotericism. Jung was able to translate esoteric principles in psychological terms, “providing a ‘scientific’ alternative to occultism.”<sup>34</sup> He sacralized psychology to an even greater degree than his predecessors had; as a result, people could talk about gods and mean a part

of their own psyches, or they could refer to their own psyches as part of the divine. The equivalence between God, mind, and psyche is fundamental to the New Age worldview; it is what makes the New Age and Neopagan emphasis on self-realization religious in nature.

Finally, the introduction of Asian philosophies and practices greatly contributed to the development of New Age thought. Central to this were the works of Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Alice Bailey (1880–1949). In 1875, Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society, a group dedicated to spirit communication and mediumship. Blavatsky's incorporation of Eastern philosophies and esoteric traditions, such as the idea of reincarnation, distinguished Theosophists from the earlier Spiritualists and led to a rift between these two groups. "While Theosophists rejected Spiritualism as philosophically unsophisticated and unc cosmopolitan, Spiritualists rejected Theosophy as unscientific occultism."<sup>35</sup> Bailey, an evangelical turned Theosophist, popularized the term "New Age" in reference to the coming transformation. Claiming to receive messages from an "Ascended Master," a Tibetan monk known as "D. K.," Bailey promoted Theosophical concepts, reconciled them with Christian doctrine, and introduced her own interpretations of esoteric astrology, including the prophecy of a coming Aquarian Age.<sup>36</sup>

These various currents of esoteric thought blossomed in 1960s counterculture, a movement that rejected orthodoxy of any kind and privileged points of view that were marginalized by the mainstream. In that crucible, the modern New Age movement emerged.

### Magic in the New Age Movement

"New Age" is an umbrella term comprising a wide variety of practices and beliefs that share a desire to transform society by transforming the self and an eschatological belief that the world is on the cusp of a great change that will lead to the dawning of a new age in human consciousness, sometimes referred to as the "Age of Aquarius." The movement is characterized by eclecticism, and it includes such disparate practices as channeling, psychic readings, astrology, past-life regression, astral projection, (neo-)shamanic journeys, naturopathic medicine, crystal healing, color- and aromatherapy, yoga, mantras, positive affirmations, an interest in lost civilizations, earth goddesses. Participation in these practices is non-exclusive; because practice is individual, rather than group-based, people can combine practices and beliefs in their own unique ways. Individuals typically become devotees of a small number of technologies and may devalue others.<sup>37</sup> Although most scholars

have emphasized the highly individualistic and personal dimensions of the New Age movement, others have understood it as a sociopolitical movement focused on countercultural values and sustainability.<sup>38</sup>

Because it is difficult to define the boundaries of the New Age movement by listing some of its component technologies and practices, another approach is to examine the common underlying beliefs of many New Age practitioners. These include:

- Theism. God is understood as the ultimate unifying principle in the universe rather than as a personal, anthropomorphized deity. Some New Agers are panentheists, seeing God as the ultimate animating force present in the universe, whereas others are pantheists, believing that God is the physical manifestation of the universe;
- A belief in a variety of spiritual beings, such as gods, angels, devas, faeries, ghosts, spirit guides, and aliens;
- A belief in a universal power, or “energy,” as the basic life force. Often equated with the concept of energy in quantum physics, this universal energy is thought to permeate all living beings as well as inanimate features, such as rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, oceans, and the earth itself. Different from heat, light, or electricity, it is more akin to the Asian concept of *chi*. Energy derives ultimately from the unifying principle, and it can be passed between individuals and manipulated and channeled using meditation and various other therapies for the purpose of healing. Certain locations, especially those deemed sacred by ancient civilizations, are thought to emanate spiritual energy (see Figure 20.3);
- A belief in reincarnation and karma as frames through which the long-term transformation of the individual are viewed. A single lifetime is not considered long enough to reach enlightenment; the individual must reincarnate multiple times to learn lessons and reach full potential. In addition to providing the reassurance of life after death, this belief can also be used to explain and justify social inequalities and negative events in life, to speculate on past lives, and to suggest the possibility of soul mates transcending numerous lifetimes;
- A belief that all religions and spiritual traditions share a common, universal core and that, in the coming New Age, there will be a single universal religion that will draw on all of the world’s major faiths. This religion will emphasize self-knowledge, personal growth, healing, transformation, and harmony with the earth and all its creatures;
- A belief that earlier prophets, such as Christ, Buddha, and Krishna, were bearers of the divine principle of unity and its message of universal love and





FIGURE 20.3. Cathedral Rock in Sedona, Arizona, a New Age attraction. Image by Kenneth Thomas, under Creative Commons License.

acceptance. These prophets are sometimes called “Ascended Masters” or “The Great White Brotherhood”;

- A lack of the concepts of evil and sin. All is God, therefore all is good. Evil is understood as ignorance, a lack of compassion, or a lack of enlightenment. Sex is a natural, positive force; all sexual orientations and gender manifestations, from cisgender to transgender, are accepted as part of the natural order and variety of the universe;
- A belief that meditation and techniques of personal transformation, as taught by various teachers, are techniques for attaining unity with the Godhead;
- Eschatology. The world is on the cusp of a great transformation, the coming of a New Age, sometimes called the Age of Aquarius, which will bring positive change. Some believe a new prophet akin to Christ or Buddha will appear to usher in the New Age;
- Teleology. Life has a purpose, even if it is unclear to humans; everything happens for a reason;
- A belief in the power of thought. “Thought Creates,” therefore it is important to focus one’s thinking on positive outcomes in order to engender them. Negative outcomes are the result of negative thoughts, and reality can be shifted by thought alone. A critical mass of highly evolved thinkers

concentrating on a particular thought can bring about change in the world. Humans have a responsibility to think and act positively and creatively in order to heal themselves and the world;

- Microcosm/macrocosm (“as above, so below”). Phenomena are linked through correspondences; therefore, for example, astrology can shed light on human behavior, one’s personality, and events on earth.<sup>39</sup>

The concept of magic is not central to the New Age movement like it is in Neopaganism. New Agers on the whole do not think of themselves as practicing magic; they are more oriented toward science as ontology. Nevertheless, there are a number of ways in which magic can be understood as playing a role in the movement’s beliefs and practices. By using the definition of magic as a type of participatory consciousness, it is evident that many New Age tenets partake in, or encourage adherents to partake in, a frame of mind that is more participatory than it is strictly logical or rational. The threads going back to Hermetic teachings, which are consistent throughout the history of Western esotericism, are evident in many New Age beliefs. At the most fundamental level, naturopathic medicine, crystal healing, color- and aromatherapy, and astrology assume a unitary cosmos in which the microcosm can stand for and influence the macrocosm, and vice versa. Faith in the power of thought to affect reality is also indicative of a degree of magical thinking. The notion of the universe as animated by energy and permeated by a divine force that is manifested through other types of spirits is characteristic of a participatory worldview. Practices designed to expand and transform the self, such as meditation, astral projection, channeling, past-life regression, shamanic journeying, and communication with spirit guides all involve the altering of consciousness to some degree and thus by definition involve magic as participatory consciousness.

What is as at least as striking as the numerous ways New Age beliefs and practices correlate to Western understandings of the magical is the resistance on the part of New Agers to the categorization. Rather than embracing the language of magic, New Agers more typically attempt to ground their practices in the language of science as a way of authenticating and legitimizing their beliefs. Scientists and skeptics, on their part, view this as New Agers misusing scientific discourse by making reference to spiritual elements that are regarded as survivals from older religious cosmologies. As David Hess notes, “[n]otions of the ascientific, pseudoscientific, or less scientific range from (as the skeptics would see it) the whole gamut of paranormal, spiritual and occult beliefs to (as the New Agers and their predecessors would see it)

a dogmatically materialistic scientific orthodoxy.”<sup>40</sup> Paradoxically, although they regard science as rigid and dogmatic and construct themselves as persecuted liberators of truth, New Agers lionize a number of scientists whose works are recognized as profoundly advancing their fields and also seem to have metaphysical implications. Among them are theoretical physicist David Bohm and the neurologist Karl Pribram, who independently developed what is referred to as the “holographic paradigm” – the belief that the entire description of something (the universe, in Bohm’s case, and the mind, in Pribram’s) is fully contained in its smallest fragment; the physicist and Nobel laureate Wolfgang Pauli, whose work with Carl Jung led to the development of the theory of synchronicity, the idea that temporally coincident events can be linked together by an inherently meaningful relationship independent of ordinary cause and effect; Ilya Prigogine, another Nobel laureate whose theory of a self-organizing universe appears to suggest the principle of unity; and Rupert Sheldrake, who developed the concept of “morphogenetic fields,” a kind of holistic aether through which entities in the world organize and communicate.<sup>41</sup> To these could be added Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, Fritjoff Capra’s *The Tao of Physics*, and Gary Zukav’s *The Dancing Wu Li Masters*. For all of their mixed feelings toward science, New Agers align themselves firmly with a tradition of reconciling the scientific and the mystical in a disenchanted world.

### Magic in Neopaganism

Neopaganism approaches the concept quite differently. Neopaganism – also called modern Paganism to distinguish it from its classical antecedents – is an etic term for a variety of religions that revive, reclaim, and experiment with pre-Christian polytheistic worship. Thus, whereas New Agers speak of a scientific orientation toward the future, Neopagans turn to the past for inspiration. Because of the great diversity of denominations and worldviews contained within this movement, it is perhaps more correct to discuss modern Paganisms in the plural. Although they are rooted in the Western tradition of esotericism, they emerged as full-blown religions only in the twentieth century.<sup>42</sup> Modern Paganisms expanded during the 1970s as a result of counterculture, environmentalism, feminism, and the search for more meaningful forms of spirituality divorced from the norms of established religions. Often calling themselves nature-based religions, they share with New Agers a view of the natural world as sacred and divinity as immanent in it. In those terms, modern Pagans name and embrace magic as a natural force.

As was the case for New Age practices, modern Pagan religions are difficult to systematize. Although many of their practices derive from literary sources, they share no sacred texts. Certain individuals within them may rise to prominence, but the movement lacks prophets or gurus. The basic unit of organization is the small group, called a circle, coven, or grove, but recent surveys indicate that the highest growth rate in Neopaganism is among solitary practitioners.<sup>43</sup> These individuals may meet with other adherents at regular “moots” or for seasonal celebrations, but they are essentially independent agents. Further complicating the picture is the fact that modern Pagan religions are non-exclusive; individuals may affiliate with a number of denominations, both within the movement and outside of it. For example, it is not unusual for Pagans of Jewish origin to identify both as Jews and as Pagans or for members to belong to several Pagan denominations simultaneously. Neopaganism currently represents one of the fastest-growing new religious movements in the world, with more than one million adherents in Europe and North America alone. There are branches of modern Paganisms on every continent in the world.

Modern Paganisms can be divided into two main groups, depending on their association with Revival Witchcraft, also known as Wicca. Wicca first came to public attention through the work of the British civil servant Gerald B. Gardner (1884–1964). In a book entitled *Witchcraft Today* (1954), he claimed to have been initiated into the last living coven of witches in England. Drawing from the theories of the Egyptologist Margaret Murray (1863–1963) and the amateur folklorist Charles G. Leland (1824–1903), he interpreted witchcraft as the survival of a pre-Christian religion that venerated a goddess associated with the moon and earth and a horned god of the hunt and vegetation. This religion, which he hypothesized had once existed all over Europe, had been misunderstood as diabolism by medieval persecutors and was forced into hiding. Its adherents had met during full moons, as well as during the cross-quarter days of the calendar (the midpoint days between each solstice and equinox, or February 1, May 1, August 1, and November 1) to worship the deities and work magic.<sup>44</sup> There is much disagreement among scholars as to whether such a group actually existed in England during the 1930s and 1940s; if one did, it probably did not date back much further than the last decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>45</sup> “The Brotherhood of the Wica,”<sup>46</sup> as Gardner said the adherents called themselves, incorporated elements from Freemasonry (Gardner was a Co-Mason), Golden Dawn ceremonial magic, folk customs and traditions, literature, and anthropological and historical interpretations of magic and witchcraft. By the late 1950s, Gardner had established at least

two working covens in southern England and appeared in newspaper, radio, and television interviews to promote the religion. Inevitably, other individuals emerged claiming to practice equally old and more authentic forms of pagan witchcraft. By the late 1960s, the various forms of modern Pagan Witchcraft, including those descended from Gardner's covens, had begun to gain adherents not only in Britain but also in North America, Australia, and parts of continental Europe.

Neopagan Witchcraft was strongly influenced by two social movements: environmentalism and second-wave feminism. Gardner had portrayed Wicca as a fertility religion, and its year-cycle rites are grounded in metaphors that are linked to natural processes of birth, growth, maturation, reproduction, death, and regeneration. Under the influence of environmentalism, its focus on fertility and belief in the immanence of the sacred in the natural world attracted adherents who felt a strong commitment to ecology and the preservation of nature and who saw the spirituality of an earlier time as a vehicle to re-enchant the world and right the wrongs that had been committed against the planet. Witchcraft also appealed to feminists who rejected the patriarchal nature of Abrahamic religions and sought active liturgical roles, as well as a connection with the divine feminine embodied in the witches' goddess. Feminist interpretations of Craft arose from the broader movement of women's spirituality that sought to reinterpret facets of mainstream religion in a feminist vein and provide more opportunities for women to access liturgical roles and spiritual authority, be it in mainstream or alternative religions. They often focused on the goddess exclusively and practiced in women-only groups where women could fully experience their spirituality without the interference of male authority. Although some forms of Goddess Spirituality embraced the word "witch," reclaiming it as an index of women's power, others avoided it, preferring instead to align with the myth of prehistoric matriarchal religions. It was also in the United States that ethnic varieties of modern Witchcraft began to emerge, allegedly deriving from parallel survivals of goddess-centered pagan religions in other parts of Europe and appealing to those who sought a spiritual dimension in their ethnic heritage.

The other, non-witchen Paganisms developed parallel to, but separately from, Revival Witchcraft, either derived from Gardner or elsewhere. Non-witchen Paganisms likewise can be subdivided into their own traditions, and foremost among them is Reconstructionism. Reconstructionist Paganisms attempt to re-create the religious practices of pre-Christian people with as much accuracy as possible even as they adapt those practices to modern times. Reconstructionists base their practice on surviving texts from the

cultures and historical periods they emulate, as well as on archeological and historical scholarship. Heathenism, for example, includes modern Pagan religions inspired by the practices of ancient Norse and Germanic peoples. Druidry comprises a number of orders based on the practices of the ancient Celtic priesthood. Celtic Reconstructionism distinguishes itself from Druidry by focusing on the daily, domestic spiritual practices of ordinary Celtic peoples. Hellenic Reconstructionism revives aspects of ancient Greek paganism. And Kemetic Reconstructionism is inspired by the religion of ancient Egypt. In some parts of Europe, Reconstructionism has taken on a strongly nationalist flavor, at times appealing to elements of the New Right.<sup>47</sup> Finally, some non-witch traditions were inspired by literature: the Church of All Worlds was founded in 1962 by Tim Zell and Richard Lance Christie in an attempt to re-create the religion portrayed in Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961), and it also incorporates material from the Western esoteric tradition, as well as an environmental ethos in its rites and practices.<sup>48</sup>

Neo-shamanism is a separate group of traditions whose spiritual techniques are based on the practices of indigenous shamans, religious specialists who journey in spirit to communicate with the supernatural realm for the benefit of the community they serve. Neo-shamans typically work with animal spirits who serve as guides to the otherworld, which they visit while in alternate states of consciousness. They use a number of techniques, such as drumming and dancing, to achieve these states, during which they communicate with otherworldly spirits. Whereas traditional shamans use spirit communication to serve their communities, neo-shamans' journeys primarily lead them to self-realization and personal healing, although many also work to heal others and the planet. Neo-shamanism owes much of its popularity to the anthropologists Carlos Casteneda (1925–1998) and Michael Harner (b. 1929). Both men wrote about their experiences studying traditional shamanism, the former with Yaqui healer Don Juan Matus,<sup>49</sup> the latter among the Jívaro Indians of the Ecuadorian rainforest,<sup>50</sup> before founding their own organizations to teach and disseminate shamanic techniques in a Western context. Harner's *The Way of the Shaman: A Guide to Power and Healing* (1980) has become a guidebook for many New Agers and Neopagans interested in alternate states of consciousness and spirit journeys. Neo-shamanism is more of a technology than a religion; its techniques are used and adapted in many variants of modern Paganism, as well as by New Agers.

Magic is more central to modern Pagan traditions to a much greater extent than it is to New Age groups. Neopagan mythic history, with its references



to witchcraft and ancient pagan cults, foregrounds magic as a technology. As might be expected in such an individualistic movement, magic has different meanings in different Pagan denominations, and it is more important to some than to others. Some Neopagans define magic as “the ability to change consciousness at will,” drawing on the definition of the early twentieth-century English ceremonial magician Aleister Crowley. This definition does not require any transformation outside of the individual’s own perception, and it is in harmony with the anthropological definition of magic as participatory consciousness. Other Neopagans prefer a definition that allows for the possibility that magic can also transform material reality. For them, magic is the ability to harness natural forces in harmony with one’s will in order to bring about a transformation. As heterodox as they are, modern Paganisms nevertheless share a view of magic as a natural force and an organizational principle for the cosmos.

Mainstream perceptions of magic have tended to emphasize its supernatural qualities – that is, if it exists at all, magic is presumed to operate through supernatural agents existing outside of the fundamental laws of nature. Among modern Paganisms, however, magic is perceived to be a force inherent in nature. Modern Pagans share with New Agers the concept of energy as a force that permeates the entire natural world. It is inherent in every living thing, as well as in the four Aristotelian elements: air, fire, water, and earth. It can be raised, manipulated, and directed toward specific ends. The art and skill of “working” energy is what Neopagans call “magic.” Energy can be harnessed by an adept to change consciousness as well as to transform reality, effecting changes in both the self and the material world. Magic to change consciousness usually has the goal of connecting with a spiritual entity: a deity, ancestor, spirit of a place, or the spirit of another living being, such as an animal or plant. Its broader aim is to bring the practitioner into closer touch with the sacred, in some cases even to merge with a deity or other spiritual being, thereby becoming god-like for a brief time. Some practitioners refer to this type of magic as theurgy, a term borrowed from the Neo-Platonists and meaning a union with a deity or other spiritual entity. This form of magic is common to a wide variety of Neopagan denominations, from Wicca, in which the goddess and god are “drawn down” into the bodies of the priestess and priest at the climax of the ritual, to neo-shamanic practices in which practitioners seek to merge with a spirit guide that often takes the form of an animal.

- Magic can also be practiced to transform physical reality in conformity with the magician’s will. This form of magic is often called thaumaturgy. Even in

thaumaturgy, however, Neopagans believe that magic follows certain universal laws. They can be synthesized into the following principles: Magic follows natural laws. Thus, magic intended to enhance the natural properties of a thing (e.g., to make seeds grow) is more likely to succeed than magic that violates natural laws (e.g., turning people into toads);

- The more simple the means that are available to achieve something, the less successful magic will be. Thus, it is easier to order pizza from the pizza place than to make a pizza magically appear;
- Invisible entities. Neopagans see the world as filled with spiritual entities, such as goddesses, gods, ancestor spirits, spirits of place, and faeries; they believe it is possible to communicate with them using magic – that is, by altering consciousness in ritual;
- Unity or sympathy. All phenomena are linked, directly or indirectly; the universe operates as an interconnected whole. This principle can be further broken down as follows:
  - Contagion. Items once in contact continue to influence one another, even after they are separated. Essence can be transferred through touch; for example, in healing magic, energy can be transmitted by the laying on of hands;
  - Homeopathy (like causes or cures like). Things that look alike are alike and can substitute for each other in ritual magic. Thus, one way to make something happen is to enact that change using a symbol in ritual;
  - Commonality controls. If two or more things have elements in common, they are linked through their commonality. For example, in the United States, money is green; thus, a spell to bring financial prosperity might use green candles, a green altar cloth, and green objects to enhance wealth through that common characteristic;
  - Microcosm/macrocosm (“as above, so below”). Larger patterns can reflect or influence smaller ones, and vice versa;
  - Synchronicity. Coincidences are meaningful;
  - Knowledge is power. To know the name of someone or something is to know its essence and to be able to control it;
  - Animism or personification. Any phenomenon can be considered alive and sentient. Thus, for example, in ritual, Neopagans might address a personal fear, asking that it depart.<sup>51</sup>

Margot Adler, a groundbreaking researcher of the movement, describes an incident that illustrates how Neopagans use magic as a natural force both to change consciousness and to bring about changes in the material world.

While working on a communal farm, she and other volunteers were given the task of collecting dying fish from a muddy riverbed and loading them onto a truck so they could be converted into fertilizer. The day was hot, the creek bed was awash with mud, and the slippery fish slid every which way, making the task well-nigh impossible. After several hours of struggle with no progress, the group leader suggested that the volunteers imagine themselves as hungry bears whose very survival depended on catching the fish. The volunteers began to imagine their hands as great paws; they brought them together to catch the fish and threw them into the truck. Within an hour, the truck bed was full of fish.<sup>52</sup> In this example, only the participants' consciousness changed: the day was equally hot, the creek was equally muddy, the fish did not leap willingly into the truck bed, and the volunteers did not actually change into bears. Yet by using their imaginations, the participants were able to change their approach to a material problem and solve it. That, many Neopagans would say, is magic.

There are two important aspects highlighted by this example. The first is that magic involves a change in consciousness – an altered or alternative state of consciousness, some would say – and not simply a change of attitude. By tapping into “Bear Consciousness,” participants were able to act as if they were bears and successfully complete the task. The second is that, in anthropological terms, the volunteers were able to temporarily shift from a rational / logical form of consciousness into one that was participatory in nature. This form of consciousness is more creative, making use of the imagination and what many might call “make-believe.” Yet it was exactly through this shift that they were able to complete the difficult task at hand. When modern Pagans seek to change their consciousness, it is this magical or participatory consciousness that they seek and that they say allows them to transform reality in accordance with their will.

When practicing thaumaturgy, Neopagans often distinguish “working for essence” from “working for form.” Working for form involves doing magic with a very specific goal in mind: x job at y company, for example, or a car of a specific make, model, year, and color. In contrast, working for essence involves analyzing one's will to discover the essence of one's desire: a feeling of financial security and stability by being gainfully employed in work that is personally rewarding, for example, or reliable transportation to and from work. Pagans say that magic for form is less likely to succeed than magic for essence is, because the latter leaves more room in the universe for reality to shift in accordance with will. Thus, a specific job at a particular company might not be available, or it could turn out to be a nightmare, but working

for a feeling of financial security and stability through rewarding employment may open up opportunities that the practitioner had not previously considered and would find equally satisfying. Magic for a particular car might not yield results, but if the magician is open to a variety of cars, or to car-pooling with a neighbor, the desired effect could be gained by different means. This idea is sometimes expressed with the proverb: "Magic won't get you what you want, but it will get you what you need."

Neopagan magic is governed by two overriding ethical principles. The first is captured in the dictum: "An it harm none, do as thou wilt." Possibly an adaptation of Aleister Crowley's "Do as thou wilt shall be the whole of the law," this principle indicates that magicians are free to practice according to their will, as long as others are not harmed in the process. This may extend not only to other persons but also to animals, plants, the environment, and the greater good of the planet. Interference with the will of others is considered a form of harm; therefore, a spell to make an individual fall in love is unethical. The ethical way of working in such a case would involve asking for love to come into one's life. The second ethical principle of magic, sometimes called the Threefold Law, holds that whatever the magician puts out is bound to return three times over. Thus, benevolent magic will bring positive results, whereas aggressive, irresponsible, or negative magic will have adverse effects on the practitioner. Magic may, however, be used in self-defense, and some practitioners hold that it is ethical to use magic against another person if it stops them from doing harm – as in binding a rapist so he or she can no longer hurt anyone.

Most Neopagans believe that magic must be accompanied by actions in the material world in order to get results; they are much less likely than New Agers to believe in the power of thought alone. Magical actions require work; wishing alone is not enough to cause change to occur. Thaumaturgical work requires some kind of symbolic enactment of the desired result, often using magical correspondences based on a deity's color, numbers, plants, minerals, and planetary associations drawn from ceremonial magic. Usually, several of these are combined in an amulet or talisman that symbolizes the result the magician hopes to obtain from the spell. The symbol is then "charged" by raising, focusing, and directing energy into it. Energy can be raised by using the imagination, stimulating emotions, or moving the body – preferably all three – through a process involving dancing in a circle and chanting while imagining the desired goal. As the energy builds to a peak, the magician focuses on the talisman or object containing the spell, aims, and "fires" the energy at this goal.<sup>53</sup> Any excess energy is "grounded" (directed into the earth).

The magic of theurgy, or union with a spirit, typically involves a trance induced through guided visualization or guided meditation, a process of storytelling in which participants are asked to imagine themselves in a scenario. The story may include a poetic invocation of the deity, or it may simply invite participants to imagine their interactions with the spirit world. In Wiccan traditions, the goddess and god are “drawn down” on the priestess and priest, respectively; they briefly possess the bodies of their hosts and interact with other coveners in that form. Non-Wiccan traditions may or may not involve deity possession. In the modern Heathen practice of seið, a diviner enters into trance to communicate with ancestors in the spirit world to answer questions from the audience. Neo-shamanic spirit journeys generally also involve an alteration of consciousness; the shaman experiences a feeling of flying outside of the body and journeying to the spirit world, where communion with animal spirits takes place.

Although magic may be performed by Pagans alone, group rituals, which take place at set times in the lunar or calendrical cycle (during full moons, solstices, equinoxes, and cross-quarter days), are more typical settings where magic occurs. Neopagan rituals may be thought of as performance art pieces that transform ordinary parks, backyards, and living rooms into enchanted spaces where participants can have extraordinary experiences. Modern Pagans use elaborate costumes, decorations, and music to create a feeling of separation from the ordinary, everyday world during their rituals. They create sacred space by “casting the circle,” marking an imaginary ring to contain the participants and the powers they invoke; but whereas the circle served their medieval and Renaissance predecessors by containing and controlling the spiritual powers invoked, modern Pagans use it to demarcate a sacred space and time within which their imaginations can have full rein. The quarters, represented by the directions of east, south, west, and north, and their corresponding Aristotelian elements of air, fire, water, and earth, are called and saluted. Deities and other spirits may be invoked, and the purpose of the ritual is stated: “We are gathered here at Midsummer to journey to the realm of Faery so we may bring back the power to re-enchant and heal the earth,” for example. Now begins the core of the ritual: the actions the planners have devised to encourage participants to personally experience the magical, the sacred. Suburban gardens are transformed by twinkling fairy lights, spooky jack-o’-lanterns, arbors draped in fabric, or other seasonal accoutrements; participants may take the parts of goddesses and gods, enacting the drama between Demeter and Persephone, the Oak King and the Holly King, or other mythical characters. Participants interact with the characters, chant, sing, dance around

a bonfire (safely contained by a fire pit), and raise energy, lifting their arms up to the stars to direct it and send it toward their goal. After the energy peaks, there is often a shared meal – “cakes and wine,” although juice is frequently substituted in respect of those who avoid alcohol for various reasons – or a potluck. For a brief time, adherents have altered their consciousness, transforming themselves into deities and the ordinary world into a participatory, enchanted realm. That is the essence of Neopagan magic.

Ultimately, although Neopagan magic strives to re-enchant the world, it, too, is grounded in participants’ experiences of disenchanted modernity. It calls for a degree of suspension of disbelief, of engrossment in a framed experience,<sup>34</sup> in order to be successful. Both New Age and Neopagan magic are thus quintessential products of modernity: less rejections of rationality than creative responses to a disenchanted world in which personal spiritual experiences are both necessary to the human spirit and deeply distrusted by the dominant paradigm.

### Trends in Current Research

The literature on magic and esotericism in Western cultures has grown exponentially in the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. One category emerging from this expansion is the field of Pagan Studies, which has given rise to several journals (e.g. *The Pomegranate* and *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* [2003–2007; now defunct]) as well as a series of books under the imprint of Altamira Press dedicated to the academic study of Neopagan magic and culture. In 2009, the venerable publisher Brill issued the *Handbook of Contemporary Pagan Studies*, a compendium of scholarly essays on a broad range of subjects and approaches to the field that includes a section specifically devoted to magic.<sup>35</sup>

In contrast, the term “New Age” has lost popularity as both participants in the movement and the scholars who study them have rejected the term. Stephen Sutcliffe argues in *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practice* (2002) that after the 1970s, the label “New Age” came to have too broad a variety of meanings to be useful, and he advocates for its elimination from academic discourse.<sup>36</sup> In keeping with that theme, Matthew Wood’s *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies* (2007) disputes the idea of New Agers as bricoleurs for whom the self is the ultimate spiritual authority, focusing instead on how groups construct “nonformative” authority by incorporating various authorities within the self.<sup>37</sup> Whereas early studies of New Age and Neopagan groups were largely sociological in nature



and focused on the origins, nature, and ethos of the movements, recent studies have focused more closely on the cultures of subgroups within these movements and engaged with how they intersect with themes of power, gender, and politics in Western neoliberal democracies. They frequently apply post-modern and feminist theory to analyze how New Age and Neopagan practices reproduce and contest established systems of power. In so doing, they challenge some of the generalizations of earlier studies. Among these are Stephen Sutcliffe and Ingvild Gilhus's *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion* (2014) and Paul Heelas's *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism* (2008).<sup>58</sup> Although published in the late 1990s, Michael F. Brown's *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (1997) is also in this category.<sup>59</sup> Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe's *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches* (2013) applies gender and feminist theory to analyze ritual and magical practices in a variety of new religious movements on a global scale, examining the influence of movements of people and religions into new cultural contexts. New Age and Neopagan spiritualities have been criticized for their appropriation of material from non-Western sources; Fedele and Knibbe's volume also illustrates the complexities of these global flows of spiritual ideas. As a counter-impulse to intercultural borrowing, the localization and nationalization of some forms of Neopaganism, along with some of their racist implications, are addressed by Michael Strmiska in *Modern Paganism in World Cultures* (2006), Mattias Gardell in *Gods of the Blood: The Pagan Revival and White Separatism* (2003), and Mariya Lesiv in *The Return of Ancestral Gods: Modern Ukrainian Paganism as an Alternative Vision for a Nation* (2013). Lee Gilmore's *Theatre in a Crowded Fire: Ritual and Spirituality at Burning Man* (2010) explores the spirituality and confluence of New Age ideas in the phenomenon of Burning Man, a week-long festival in the Nevada Desert that has become a form of pilgrimage for many attendees who otherwise eschew religion. A spate of yet-unpublished research investigates the relationships between New Age and Neopagan worldviews, perceptions of nature, and sustainable practices. In conclusion, a great deal of research remains to be done in order to understand the variety of movements subsumed under the rubric of "New Age" and "Neopaganism," their individual worldviews, and their relationships with larger structures of power.

## Notes

1. Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven*, 7.
2. See Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion," 237–259; Styers, *Making Magic*, 4

3. Hutton, "The New Old Paganism," 107.
4. Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 87–125.
5. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religion*, 22.
6. See Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*; Melton, Clark, and Kelly, eds., *The New Age Encyclopedia*; Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religion*; and York, *The Emerging Network*.
7. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religion*, 22.
8. Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 85.
9. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 79.
10. *Ibid.*, 62.
11. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 55.
12. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 19.
13. Luhrmann, *Persuasions of the Witches' Craft*, 308–323.
14. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*.
15. Wax and Wax, "The Notion of Magic," 495–503.
16. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, in Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 91–92.
17. Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion*, 24.
18. Greenwood, *The Nature of Magic*, 42.
19. Melton, Clark, and Kelly, eds., *The New Age Encyclopedia*, xiii.
20. Pike, *New Age and Neopagan Religion*, 27.
21. Seið is a modern Pagan practice that reclaims an ancient Norse rite of prophesy and divination. See Blain, *Nine Worlds of Seið-Magic*.
22. Antoine Faivre, in Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 398–400.
23. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 388.
24. Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven*, 12–13; see also Burnett and Ryan, *Magic and the Classical Tradition*; Faivre, *The Eternal Hermes*, 181–185; Hanegraaff, "Beyond the Yates Paradigm," 5–37; and Lucentini, Parri, and Compagni, eds., *Hermetism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*.
25. Drury, *Stealing Fire from Heaven*, 7.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, 120.
28. *Ibid.*, 59.
29. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 396–397.
30. *Ibid.*, 401–421.
31. *Ibid.*, 429.
32. *Ibid.*, 423.
33. See Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*.
34. *Ibid.*, 513.
35. Hess, *Science and the New Age*, 20.
36. Lewis and Melton, *Perspectives on the New Age*, xi.
37. Melton, Clark, and Kelly, eds., *New Age Encyclopedia*, xiv.

38. See Satin, *New Age Politics*; Roszak, *Person/Planet*; McLaughlin, *Spiritual Politics*.
39. Adapted from Melton, Clark, and Kelly, eds., *New Age Encyclopedia*, xvi–xvii.
40. Hess, *Science and the New Age*, 17.
41. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*, 63.
42. See Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*; and Hutton, *The Druids*.
43. Berger, “Fifteen Years of Continuity and Change.”
44. During the late 1950s, the solstices and equinoxes were added to the ritual calendar through the influence of Ross Nichols, one of the founders of modern Druidry, on Gerald Gardner. See Hutton, “Modern Pagan Festivals,” 251–273.
45. For a discussion of this, see Hutton, *Triumph of the Moon*, 205–240; and Heselton, *Witchfather: A Life of Gerald Gardner*.
46. The spelling was later changed to “Wicca,” the form used today, based on the Old English word *wicce*, meaning “witch.”
47. See Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures*; and Hale, “John Michell, Radical Traditionalism,” 77–97.
48. See York, “Invented Culture/Invented Religion,” 135–136, 141; and Cusack, *Invented Religions*, 53–82.
49. Casteneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan*. Critiques by other anthropologists have alleged that Casteneda’s book is fictional; this is the accepted position in contemporary anthropology.
50. Harner, *The Jivaro*.
51. Magliocco, *Witching Culture*, 102–104.
52. Adler, *Drawing down the Moon*, 6–8.
53. Bonewits, *Real Magic*, 159–160.
54. Goffman, *Frame Analysis*.
55. Lewis and Pizza, eds., *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*.
56. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age*, 39–40.
57. Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age*, 4–5.
58. Sutcliffe and Gilhus, *New Age Spirituality*; and Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*.
59. Brown, *The Channeling Zone*.

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